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PALESTINE REFUGEE PROBLEM

THE AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE JEZIREH IN SYRIA

Of the various areas in Syria which offer scope for agricultural development the Jezireh is the most important:-

(a) It is a large area and, if farmed on sound up-to-date lines, it can make a valuable contribution towards food production, whilst at the same time adding materially to the wealth of Syria itself.

(Existing official statistics place the area cultivated in the Jezireh in 1946 at 783,000 acres, and the cultivable waste area at more than 1-3/4 million acres. Whilst these figures must be accepted as estimates and not actualities, they show that there is immense scope for development).

(b) The nature of the terrain is such that the tract is particularly suitable for mechanised farming, a fortunate circumstance for a country such as Syria with large areas capable of development and an inadequate indigenous population to carry it out.

(c) Although the maximum utilisation of the waters of the River Khabour can produce a material increase in the area under irrigated farming, some years must elapse before that condition can be achieved, since it requires the building of barrages, the construction of canals, the provision of pumps, lifts and other equipment. Rainfed farming, however, is to-day and will continue in the future to be the principal system of cultivation in this area, another fortunate circumstance where quick and relatively inexpensive development is needed.

For the rapid exploitation of the agricultural resources in the Jezireh the immediate requirements are considered to be men and machinery.

Communications.

In planning the development and full utilization of the land resources of the Jezireh, an inseparable problem is the simultaneous development of communications. At present the Jezireh is extremely isolated. No all-weather road enters it and the whole north of the district - the area of highest rainfall and hence of greatest agricultural potential - is cut off by

off by road after rain. Within the district also constructed roads are entirely absent except for short distances east and west of Kamichliye. Any programme of agricultural development should link up, therefore, with a corresponding communications' programme, if the maximum good is to result.

Machinery.

Mechanisation is already a prominent feature of the agriculture of the Jezireh. Of the estimated 300 farm tractors now operating in Syria, about 200 are believed to be concentrated in the Jezireh alone, which is estimated to have also 140 combine-harvesters, apart from other complementary farm machinery. This good beginning now needs to be followed up in two main directions:-

(a) Action to secure that there is set up in the area an adequate and efficient organisation to handle the maintenance and repairs of tractors and other machines.

Manufacturers of British tractors emphasise that they are unwilling to supply their products to countries which have not already made adequate and suitable provision in this direction. Some of them also insist that countries send their representatives to Great Britain for a short but intensive course of study in both the mechanism of their tractors and the practical handling of them in the field.

An idea of the importance attached in British mechanised farming to a sound servicing and maintenance organisation and all that this involves is given in my note "The Organisation of Mechanised Farming in Great Britain".

(b) Action to obtain a large number of additional tractors and connected machines for the area.

The prospects of Great Britain being able to make a contribution towards the supply of suitable tractors are indicated in my recent note "Latest Developments in British Tractors". It is apparent that this contribution will require to be reinforced by purchases of American tractors also.

British manufacturers are likely to be able to make supplies of ploughs, cultivators, seed drills and other implements of cultivation. America will be the main source of supply of combine-harvesters.

Man-power

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It seems most desirable that the Government of Syria should give very early consideration to its future policy in regard to the agricultural development of the Jezireh. In particular the following questions call for answers:-

1. Is future development to be left to haphazard private enterprise, as appears to have been the case hitherto, or is it to be put by Government on the proper organised basis by which alone the maximum benefits will be obtained in the minimum time?

2. To what extents is the area to be developed on a fully mechanised and on a peasant cultivator basis?

The decisions taken on these points must inevitably have repercussions on both the exact nature of the action to be taken and the rapidity or tardiness of development.

In regard to the first of these questions the advantages of development through a suitably organised Public Utility Corporation or similar Body merit careful exploration. If Syria is in doubt as to the merits of such an organisation, or as to its capacity for sound development, it is suggested that those doubts will be dispelled quickly if a visit at high level is paid by Syria to see at first hand the achievement of the Sudan Plantations' Syndicate. A full account of the organisation, functions and manner of working of the Syndicate has already been supplied to the Director of Agriculture, Syria. Any alterations necessary in that organisation to make it suitable for Syrian requirements could be made without difficulty.

If conditions of land tenure and other local circumstances effecting the operations of such a corporation already suit or can be arranged to suit it, the practical advantages of development by such means are numerous, e.g.:-

1. It can relieve Government of various functions which in other circumstances Government should perform.

2. It can provide the capital outlay for the supply of the mechanised equipment necessary to develop the area on a large scale, and it can operate that equipment on a hire-contract basis. It can provide and run the maintenance and servicing facilities necessary for the efficient operation of this machinery.

3. It can provide the technical organisation necessary for the efficient cultivation and development of the large tract within its sphere of activity.

4. It can undertake or assist in the development of the water resources of the area and their utilisation for agricultural purposes.

5. It can

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5. It can undertake the organisation of the marketing of the produce.

6. By thorough cultivation, the use of the most modern scientific technique, the adoption of crop rotations suited to the needs and possibilities of the locality, the rational use of fertilisers, good seed, the control of insect pests and diseases, in short, by the adoption of sound crop husbandry, it will obtain the greatest return from the land at least cost and in the shortest time: simultaneously it will secure uniform development throughout the area.

Another organisation whose methods of working repay study is the Overseas Food Corporation of Great Britain. This organisation derives the finance with which it operates from a grant of £55. million sterling, voted by the British Parliament. Its first activities have been directed to the well-known East African Groundnuts Scheme, a project to bring under cultivation over 3 million acres of land, hitherto jungle, for the production of groundnuts and crops in rotation therewith.

More recently, in conjunction with the Government of Queensland, the Corporation has been associated with setting up a Queensland-British Food Corporation under their joint auspices, with the immediate task of cultivating 250,000 acres of land, now grazing, for the production of certain food grains. Of the estimated capital expenditure of £52½ millions Australian on this project, the Corporation is to provide £2 millions and the Government of Queensland £½ million.

It is understood that the Corporation has been exploring the possibilities of assisting in the similar development of a large tract of country in New Guinea.

These particular organisations are mentioned in order to give an idea of the scale on which such Bodies work and the functions which they perform, so that Syria may consider the feasibility of bringing into being some such Body for the development of the Jezireh. Naturally no organisation of this nature will be prepared to function without adequate security against the termination of contract with changes of Government, and it will require a long period arrangement in view of its considerable investment.

The remarks in the foregoing paragraphs are relevant to the question of man-power requirements for the agricultural development

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development of the Jezireh, as different types of development will require different degrees of intensity of agricultural labour: mechanisation under a fully regimented Corporation programme making the fullest use of the land will require one degree of human labour: mechanisation of the present individually run type will need a different rate: cultivation by animal power on a peasant basis will have entirely different and vastly greater needs than either of them, for example:-

(a) On the 800,000 acres cultivated by the Sudan Plantations Syndicate where cropping, as in Jezireh, is also mainly of the one-season-a-year type but, unlike it, is done entirely under irrigation, each tenant and his family has an area of 40 acres on which all the initial ploughing and ridging operations are performed for him by mechanisation. The tenant keeps no cattle; he merely provides the human labour element.

(b) On the Sudan White Nile Schemes where there is no mechanisation and where cultivation is done by communally-owned bullocks, the holding of each tenant and his family is 18 acres of irrigated land.

(c) On the Italian Demographic Settlement in Tripolitania where cultivation is by animal drawn implements, the area controlled by the cultivator and his family may be 25 acres entirely irrigated, or 60 acres of which 12 are irrigated, or from 75 to 150 acres all of which is rainfed land, according to local conditions of soil and climate.

(d) The original estimates of the East African Groundnuts Scheme, where as in most of the Jezireh, cropping is rainfed, calculated that one man will be sufficient to provide the entire human labour requirements for the agricultural operations on 100 acres when the land is in full production. It may be assumed that he will be accompanied by his wife and family.

These data give some indication of the degree to which agricultural labour is absorbed by different types of large-scale organised farming under Eastern conditions. The ability or otherwise of Syria to provide labour on any comparable scale for the development of the agricultural resources of the Jezireh calls for consideration.

Data in

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Data in regard to population, cultivated and culturable waste-land in Syria are contained in an official publication covering 1946. These figures relevant to the present subject have been summarised in the attached statement. It should be understood clearly that the existing methods of collecting agricultural statistics in Syria are very imperfect and that the data here presented are estimates rather than actualities.

Accepting the figures at their face values it will be observed that -

1. The total population of Syria is less than 3 millions.

2. The cultivated area is estimated at under 5-3/4 million acres.

3. The culturable waste is estimated to be more than 8½ million acres.

4. The population of the country as a whole represents 515 persons of all ages, both urban and rural, per 1,000 acres of cultivated land in Syria.

5. The corresponding figure for the Jezireh is only 190 persons per 1,000 acres of cultivation.

6. The total population of Syria represents 207 persons of all ages in town and country per 1,000 acres of combined cultivated land and culturable waste.

7. The corresponding figure for the Jezireh is only 58 persons per 1,000 acres. This figure includes women and children, the industrial, business, professional and other town dwellers as well as rural inhabitants.

8. It would seem that the figures for agricultural labourers must be accepted with reserve. Thus it is difficult to believe that out of a total population of 229,232 shown for the Euphrates district - an area lacking a town of any very considerable size - agricultural labourers should number only 22,300, or less than 10% of the whole.

For what it may be worth, however, the data shows that agricultural labourers (male and female) in the Jezireh average only 20 per 1,000 acres cultivated and culturable, or 50 acres

50 acres per labourer. Since two-thirds of the labourers of the district are shown as males, the area in terms of male labour is 75 acres for each man. No information is available as to whether or not children are included in these figures, or if omitted, from what age they find a place in them. If they are included the effective agricultural man-power is at a very low level. At best it is probably no more, and may be less, than the ratio of man to area estimated as adequate for the East African Groundnuts Scheme under a system of farming which is 100% mechanised. It must also be remembered that the East African figure is still an unproved estimate which may eventually be found to be inadequate to requirements. Obviously, too, the particular crops which are grown and the crop rotations which are adopted will affect the final requirements of agricultural labour.

One arrives at the general conclusion, therefore, that if the Jezireh is to be developed to any appreciable extent it will be necessary to import agricultural labour into it, whatever the type of cultivation which may be adopted. If full development is to be the aim the extent of immigration required must be considerable.

A recent independent economic survey of Syria goes to show that the other districts which, next to the Jezireh, offer the best prospects for agricultural development in Syria are also short of agricultural labour and that only one district in the country is calculated to have an excess. The transfer to the Jezireh of the whole of such excess as may exist seems unlikely to be adequate to provide for the shortage in that district under an extensive rural development programme. Outside sources of labour will need to be considered.

The present would appear to be an appropriate moment for Syria to determine its land colonisation policy, if it has not already done so. If it approves the entry of outside nationals in considerable numbers it should consider, and if possible decide in favour of, the settlement of Palestinian Arab refugees of the agricultural classes in its under-populated and agriculturally under-developed areas, particularly the Jezireh. Even under mechanised farming, for which it is particularly suitable, that territory could absorb

many thousands

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many thousands of suitable people on the land. If it were decided, in addition, to reserve a given area or a large tract for development on a peasant cultivator basis, the number that could be absorbed would be greatly increased. Road construction and the development of communications generally, the canalisation of areas to be newly brought under irrigation, the provision of domestic water requirements and other essential developmental operations also can provide work and will be a valuable asset in the agricultural off-season.

22.10.48.

H.R. STEWART.

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